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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NEW DELHI 005208

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [ENRG](#) [EPET](#) [PGOV](#) [RS](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: SONIA GANDHI CAPS INDIA'S MONTH IN RUSSIA

REF: A. MOSCOW 7987

[1](#)B. NEW DELHI 4270

[1](#)C. NEW DELHI 4447

Classified By: POL Geoff Pyatt, for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Sonia Gandhi's trip to Russia from June 13-16 (Ref A) on her first bilateral visit abroad since taking over as the United Progressive Alliance Chairperson has stirred debate about the symbolism of her trip and provoked a front-page controversy over questions of ethics and protocol. Delhi-based foreign analysts noted Gandhi family ties to Russia and the need for Russian assistance to meet India's growing energy needs, while political pundits speculated that she might use the trip to dig up information on UP Chief Minister Yadav's 1997 Sukhoi deal and also to ease relations between the Congress and its Communist allies. Although her trip was viewed here as more symbolic than substantial, Mrs. Gandhi followed in the footsteps of the Prime Minister, President and Foreign Minister, who all visited within the last month, illustrating Russia's continued importance as a traditional partner and energy supplier even as India's foreign policy branches out. End Summary.

Why Madame Gandhi?

[1](#)2. (U) United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Chairperson Sonia Gandhi's decision to travel to Russia with FM Natwar Singh on her first bilateral foreign trip, with little notice or coverage in the press, surprised many Delhi-based observers. Amit Baruah, the Diplomatic Correspondent at "The Hindu," speculated that the Gandhi family's historical ties to Moscow and Indira and Rajiv's frequent visits to Russia made it a comfortable choice. Sonia has her own connection to Russia, having reportedly travelled on this trip to the cities of Vladimir and Suzdal, where her father, Stefan Maino, was a POW during WWII. According to the "Asian Age," she was influenced by her father's Russian experience and studied Russian growing up.

[1](#)3. (C) Mrs. Gandhi may also have intended to send a signal that she is expanding her role in foreign affairs. For the first year of the UPA regime, Sonia was very careful to let PM Manmohan Singh take the limelight, and rarely met with foreign visitors. When the Russia trip was announced, "The Hindu's" Baruah noted that Sonia's political role and lack of foreign affairs experience made it "out of sync for Mrs. Gandhi to be involved in foreign policy decision making." This accords with what we know of UP policy making -- with Sonia out of the official decision loop on routine foreign policy matters. According to Zafar Agha, former news editor of the weekly "India Today," Sonia wanted to change that view by "testing the waters" to see how she shapes up abroad and demonstrating to her party that she is capable of handling both domestic and external affairs. According to Agha, showing greater foreign policy skills strengthens her hand internally by "making her an indispensable figure that can play any card." Sonia has also recently retained the services of foreign policy staffer Aneil Methrani, who was secretary of the AICC foreign affairs committee when Congress

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was out of power, and was given an Ambassadorship in 2004. Given the Gandhi family's historically strong connection to Russia, Agha noted that Putin's invitation was the perfect opportunity for her debut. Sonia has also reportedly received official invitations to travel to Pakistan and China.

Foreign Policy Explanations

[1](#)4. (C) The GOI had plenty of high-level opportunities to strengthen bilateral ties in recent weeks (Ref A), so although Mrs. Gandhi's trip was without a public agenda, it nevertheless had foreign policy implications. Indian press reported that Ambassador to Russia Kanwal Sibal described Putin's invitation as "an exceptional gesture of friendship on the part of President Putin that reflects the high importance both sides attach to their relations." MEA Russian expert Dr. T. Suresh Babu noted to Poloff that this trip was part of the "ongoing intensive cooperation" between friends, hoping to "add substance to the relationship," but

"not a breakthrough trip."

15. (C) According to Mr. Babu, Sonia met with President Putin for lunch and addressed the Dialogue of Civilizations World Society Forum, organized by the Center of National Glory in Russia, where she spoke of the need to work with Russia to address terrorism and strengthen the "forces of multilateralism (Ref A)." Highlighting the need to add substance to Russia-India ties through greater people to people contacts and economic cooperation, JNU professor Gulshan Sachdeva commented that despite "11 summit meetings and 112 agreements in the last 12 years," tangibly there is little outside of defense and energy agreements to show for the relationship. Veena Nair, a professor of Politics at Lady Shri Ram College, told Poloff that Sonia's trip reassured Moscow that even as the Congress party continues to strengthen new relationships across the globe, Russia is still an important ally.

16. (C) Baruah described this as a "political signal to the Russian leadership," at the base of which is the GOI's energy policy. With a reported 1.7 billion USD invested in the Sakhalin I oil field and recent MOUs for underground coal gasification and hydrocarbon cooperation, India's relationship with Russia is increasingly centered around energy security. After three top-level visits in May and June featuring a public emphasis on nuclear energy, Baruah said that "knowing the way the Russian system works, the GOI must have seen that closer relations would be helpful in gaining access to Russia's energy reserves." New Delhi's close ties with Moscow also helped procure an invitation for Delhi to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as an observer, which also helps advance India's energy agenda in Central Asia.

Internal Political Motivations

17. (C) Mrs. Gandhi's status as chairperson of the ruling coalition predictably spurred a host of rumors about the message her trip sends back home. Delhi-based pundits speculated that Sonia went to Russia to dig up information about the Indian purchase of 40 Russian Sukhois made when current Uttar Pradesh (UP) Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav was Defense Minister in 1997. Yadav has been implicated in a scheme under which India would pay an advance of 500 million USD to Russia for the aircraft in 1995 to bail out the Sukhoi manufacturer. If Congress can unearth evidence in Russia to substantiate the implications, that would help discredit Yadav and strengthen Rahul Gandhi's prospects for developing a political power base in UP. Journalist Agha speculated that Sonia is on the lookout for this evidence and will "be asking through her interlocutors," but doubted that Russia would oblige her on the Sukhoi deal, knowing that any information would come back to haunt Moscow as well.

18. (C) An alternative view in political circles is that Sonia went to Russia because the Congress party is concerned about growing influence by the Left Front (LF), the group of four Communist parties that support Congress in the UPA coalition. From this perspective, her trip was aimed at playing on the difference between the Russian leaning CPI and the Chinese influenced CPI(M) to strengthen the former. Mrs. Gandhi could also have hoped to fracture the LF in several states that are holding elections in early 2006. Political commentator and journalist Agha observed that the country-based ideological alignments of the communist parties do not matter much these days, and that Mrs. Gandhi's trip "would generally give a good signal to the left." He speculated that the trip might help Congress get "very mild support in Kerala" in the next election, but concluded that Gandhi would never be able to weaken and split the LF.

Opposition Cries Fowl

19. (C) Still smarting from the recent Advani leadership crisis (Refs B and C), the BJP used Sonia's trip as fodder for front-page accusations of impropriety in her travel to Russia. In addition to several protocol complaints, the more serious accusation concerned Gandhi's choice to take a private jet belonging to the "Reliance" business conglomerate to fly to Russia. The GOI is currently conducting multiple investigations into Reliance activities. Party Treasurer Motilal Vora asserted that Congress paid 12 lakh rupees (or about 27,000 USD) in advance for the plane, which he contended was normal practice for both the Congress and the Opposition. Political commentator Agha noted that all Indian politicians use corporate jets, often without paying for them and that the BJP was trying to divert attention from the Advani crisis. The controversy died out after the Congress documented BJP use of Reliance jets for recent domestic travel.

Comment

10. (C) The Congress President's unique position in Indian politics allowed Sonia simultaneously to resurrect Gandhi family ties with Russia, establish herself as a capable figure in foreign affairs, and curry more support from the left parties. Although her foreign policy debut was marked by controversy over protocol and planes, the UPA viewed the trip as a success, which may pave the way for Mrs. Gandhi to accept invitations to China and Pakistan. The timing of Gandhi's trip, coming in the wake of other senior level visits to Moscow, is an indication of the importance to India of energy and defense acquisition and its continued commitment to close ties with Russia, even as the PM pursues a new and stronger partnerships with Washington.

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